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BODY:

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said today President Reagan's futuristic space-based missile defense could be the key to making deep cuts in nuclear offensive weapons.

He said those who opposed the so-called "Star Wars" defense including Democratic presidential aspirant Walter Mondale could foreclose the option of future presidents to make a decision that would profoundly affect the American people.

Weinberger, in a speech to the National Press Club, said "what we propose is a policy of deterrence that is based on destroying weapons and not people."

He was rebutting criticism of the space defense plan leveled recently by the congressional Office of Technology Assessment and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Strategic Defense Initiative, unveiled by Reagan in March 1983, is based on using lasers and other high technology to knock out attacking Soviet nuclear missiles.

The criticism included allegations that such defense is unattainable in the foreseeable future and its development would violate the U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty.

Weinberger said research is permitted by the treaty and no deployment is yet contemplated. Moreover, he said, the administration acknowledged that much research is still required into a space-based defense.

But he said it was a "possible dream" and "yesterday's science fiction is really today's reality."

Reagan has asked Congress for \$2 billion for "Star Wars" research in 1985, and officials say the entire program could reach \$26 billion by the time the defense is deployed some time round the year 2000.

Weinberger told his audience Mondale's remark that Reagan's space defense "opens the heavens to warfare" was an offhand comment that ignored the fact that the Soviet Union had been developing space weapons since 1967.

To drop "Star Wars," Weinberger said, will only freeze the United States into a position of disadvantage.

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The space-based defense, he said, "could be the key step to truly deep cuts in offensive nuclear weapons."

He also confirmed that the United States had a parapsychological research program in response to similar Soviet research reportedly into such subjects as Extra Sensory Perception -- seeking to read the minds of adversaries or sense the movement of troops, aircraft and ships.

Asked about this, Weinberger said "We look at everything that we think would be useful."

He added: "I wouldn't be prepared to characterize the capability of the Soviets in this area. It is certain they have been working on it for some time and it's incumbent that we work on it and be aware of any late developments and be prepared to avoid anything in the nature of a breakthrough."

He gave no details of U.S. research in this field.

Asked about cuts in the defense budget proposed by Congress, he said Reagan had already made reductions, and anything further would cause a serious risk to the national security.

Reagan first asked for \$305 billion for 1985, but later cut it by \$6 billion under congressional pressure for reductions to help reduce the budget deficit.